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## Divorce among Transnational Finnish Somalis: Gender, Religion, and Agency<sup>1</sup>

MULKI AL-SHARMANI\*

### Abstract

This article focuses on divorce among Somali Muslim migrants in Helsinki, drawing on a four-year qualitative study. I examine how divorce experiences are shaped by the transnational social fields inhabited by my interlocutors through family ties and relationships navigated across multiple national contexts. I show that the break-up of marriage is enabled by gendered shifts in my interlocutors' access to resources and scope for agency within the context of transnationally-shaped marriages, accompanied by incongruence between spouses' marriage goals and values. I trace these shifts and their underlying discourses. I argue that gender as a marker of difference and power is experienced in fluid and mixed ways as husbands and wives have differentiated claims to resources such as education, income, legal rights, and welfare provisions. These gendered experiences are also shaped by my interlocutors' positioning within a new religious discourse that revisits Muslim spousal roles and rights, particularly men's privileges and practices.

### Keywords

divorce; Somali migrants; transnational families; gender; religion; Finland.

### Author affiliation

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<sup>1</sup> I thank the interlocutors for their generous participation in this study. My thanks are also due to the co-editors of this special issue for their repeated and useful feedback and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Special thanks to Sanna Mustasaari for insightful comments on several drafts of this article.

and transnational migrant families in Europe with a focus on modern Somali diaspora.

## Introduction

The 1990 civil war in Somalia marked the beginning of a large exodus of Somalis, seeking refuge in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America, and Australia. The first wave arrived in Finland in 1990. Finland's history of immigration is relatively recent. Although it began with the arrival of refugees from the Russian-Finnish border at the time of independence from Russia in 1917, it was only in the 1980s that Finland actually became a country of immigration. At the time of their arrival, the Somali refugees were received with hostility, and the difficult economic recession that the country was experiencing at the time contributed to this unwelcoming atmosphere (Open Society Foundation 2013: 25–26). A second wave of Somali migrants arrived in 2007 and 2008. Currently Somali migrants and their children, with a total number estimated at 18,000, constitute the largest African migrant group, and the largest Muslim group.<sup>2</sup> They are also the third largest migrant group in the country.<sup>3</sup>

Recent literature on Somali migration shows that many Somalis lead 'transnational diasporic lives' (Al-Sharmani 2010; Hautaniemi 2011; Horst 2007; Tiilikainen 2011). Two processes underlie Somali migrants' 'living transnationally' (Al-Sharmani 2010). The first is that their daily lives, aspirations and challenges, and their resources and life choices, are embedded in close ties and interdependent relationships with family relatives living in multiple countries. Second, migrants often counter the challenges of being economically and culturally marginalized groups through strategies and practices that extend beyond the borders of their adopted countries. In other words, Somali migrants inhabit what Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller call 'transnational social fields' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Their daily lives are embedded in 'a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships, through which ideas, practices, and resources, are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed' within and across multiple national contexts (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 9). Those who inhabit these transnational social fields are not only migrants but also others in their kin-based networks who remained in the countries of origin or who live elsewhere.

While different aspects of the transnational lives of Somali migrants in Finland have been studied (Hautaniemi 2011; Pirkkalainen 2013; Tiilikainen 2011), research on their intimate relationships is only recently emerging (Al-Sharmani 2015; Al-Sharmani and Ismail 2017; Al-Sharmani et al. 2017). This article contributes to

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<sup>2</sup> The number of Muslims in Finland is estimated at 60,000–65,000, comprising 1% of the total population of the country (5.5 million). Other Muslims include immigrants from North African and Middle Eastern countries, Finnish Muslim converts, and the oldest Muslim community in the country, the Tatar. See Official Statistics of Finland, *Population Structures, Annual Review*, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The largest migrant group is the Russians with a total number of 70,899, followed by the Estonians with a total number of 36, 036. See Official Statistics of Finland, *Population Structures, Annual Review*, 2014.

this gap, focusing on divorce. First, I situate this study within the literature on migration and marriage. Then I describe the research context and profile of the interlocutors who took part in the study. Afterwards, I examine how they were positioned within transnational social fields, and what resources they gained or lacked as a result of migration and/or migration-related processes. I trace how marital conflicts took place at the intersection of different structures of power, resulting in complex gendering of women and men's experiences of divorce and scope for agency. I shed light on how women and men variedly draw on religion to make sense of their divorce experiences, and how women, in particular, are using newly acquired religious knowledge and language as a source of empowerment. I reflect on how women's choices and religious understanding of spousal roles and rights challenge binaries such as secular-inspired women's empowerment versus their religiously-based marginalization.

## Transnationally-Shaped Muslim Marriages

The multifaceted linkages between migration and marriage have been studied extensively (Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Carol et al. 2014; Charsley 2013; Charsley and Liversage 2012; Constable 2005; Flemmen 2008; Leinonen and Pellander 2014; Liversage 2012; Razack 2004). The key issues that have been researched are: how particular types of marriage are facilitated and/or contested through migration; how these marriages are enabled by factors such as global inequalities, revolutionary advances in telecommunication, and migrants' individual and familial motivations; how countries of settlement regulate migrant marriages and divorces; how migrant marriages are framed in public discourses; and how migrants organize marriage and divorce and navigate shifts in gender roles and rights. Muslim migrant marriage norms and practices, in particular, have attracted special attention, often due to essentialist constructions of Muslim gender norms and Islamic family law, which result in the pathologization of Muslim migrant men and victimization of women (Banjour and de Hart 2013; Kapur 2002; Razack 2004).

Informed by Levitt and Glick Schiller's work on transnational social fields, this article examines the breakup of transnationally-shaped marriages of Somali Muslim migrants in Finland. I use the term 'transnationally-shaped' marriage as a broad category that refers to marriages between a migrant in Finland and a spouse coming from elsewhere (For example transnational marriage), as well as unions between two migrants who are based in Finland and whose marriage is also impacted by the couple's transnational ties. My analysis draws on scholars who have dealt with the intersection of gender and other power differentials. In their theory of 'gendered geographies of power,' Pessar and Mehlar (2003) propose a theoretical framework to explain how 'gender is imagined and lived across multiple social and spatial scales' (Pessar and Mehlar 2003: 818). The authors' framework has three dimensions: geographic scales, social locations, and power geometries. Geographic scales denote the geographic and social spaces within which gender operates (For example the body, the family, the state), whereas social locations refer to the positions of individuals within interconnected power hierarchies. 'Power geometries' then refers to the agency that individuals enact (conceptually by strategizing and formulating ideas, and/

or through tangible actions). Pessar and Mehlar, similar to Levitt and Glick Schiller, seek to capture the multi-sited multidimensional spaces within which transnational migratory lives are located. Similarly, they emphasize the fluid, shifting, and sometimes contradictory ways in which gender is experienced in such lives. This article, likewise, highlights the transnational, multidimensional, and dynamic workings of gender in the marriage dissolution of Finnish Somali migrants. I investigate shifts in spousal resources and leverage for power as a result of the interlocutors' gendered embeddedness within kin-based transnational networks. I shed light on how their experiences of divorce and scope for agency are shaped by these shifts. Drawing on Pessar and Mehlar's concept of 'power geometries,' I also examine my interlocutors' agency, particularly the agency of women, and how it is realized discursively and in praxis.

In her study on transnational marriages between Norwegian and Russian couples in Norway, Anne Britt Flemmen (2008) uses an intersectional approach to research gender dynamics in these unions within the context of Norwegian public discourses on migrant minorities and global political economy that places different nationalities and ethnicities in structures of hierarchy vis-à-vis one another. Flemmen does not treat gender, class, nationality, or race as fixed and stable categories. Rather she examines how these categories intersect dynamically in her informants' lives, resulting in varied structures of difference and hierarchy. For example, Flemmen shows how 'the meaning of gender changes when related to nationality,' as demonstrated in the discursive and structural power differentials between Russian men and Norwegian men, and the 'meaning of Norwegianness changes according to the class background of Norwegian men in question and the meaning and consequences of Russianness differ for women and men'. Similarly, my analysis will demonstrate how categories associated with power differentials among the Somali interlocutors in this study such as gender, education, Finnish citizenship, and religion are not fixed and stable. Rather these categories interplay in complex ways within the transnational social relationships in which interlocutors' lives are situated.

## Research Context

This article draws on a four-year study of marriage norms and practices among Somali migrants in Finland.<sup>4</sup> The study investigates three main issues: migrants' marriage aspirations, strategies, and challenges; the norms and laws that govern migrants' marriages and divorces; and the interplay between marriage and family life and migrants' transnational family-based networks and relationships. Overall field data was collected from interviews with individual migrants, focus group discussions,<sup>5</sup> interviews with mosque-based mediators and arbiters in

<sup>4</sup> This study entitled 'Transnational Somali Families in Finland: Discourses and Lived Realities of Marriage' is designed and led by the author. It is part of a larger Academy of Finland project, comprising three studies, entitled 'Transnational Muslim Marriages: Wellbeing, Gender, and Law'. See <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/transnationalmuslimmarriages/esimerkkisivu/>

<sup>5</sup> Individual interviews with 37 migrant women and men and 5 focus group discussions with women and men were conducted by the author and post-doctoral researcher,

family disputes, and a case study of a mosque-run programme for families. My focus in this article is on the data collected from ten divorced women and men (five each). My overall analysis, however, is also informed by the full scope of my data.

### ***Profile of Interlocutors***

The demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the entire sample represent the overall profile of Somali migrants in some key aspects. The sample comprised women and men, from first and second generation migrants. The majority were in their twenties and thirties. This is congruent with the national statistics on Somali migrants, which report that this migrant group is fairly young with 52% under 20 years old and 32% in the age range of 20–39.<sup>6</sup> The women, particularly the second generation, had higher education than the men, which is once more consistent with the profile of Somali migrants at large. The employment rate among this sample, however, was relatively higher than the reported rates on the employment of Somali migrants in Finland at large.<sup>7</sup> See Table 1.

The five divorced women were of a younger generation than the men. Two were in their mid-twenties and moved to Finland with their families when they were only toddlers. These two young women were highly educated and economically independent. One held a full-time professional job, while the other – after having held several professional jobs – was pursuing university studies in a competitive field. The other three women, who were in their thirties, came to the country as young brides in their late teens and early twenties. They were less educated than the second-generation women. One of them, having learnt the Finnish language fluently, held a series of short-term service jobs and at the time of research was employed full-time in a day-care centre. The other two women were full-time care providers for their children and very occasionally did temporary part-time work such as assisting with childcare in a day-care centre or restocking shelves in a supermarket. One of these mothers was also pursuing part-time studies for her high school degree as well as doing volunteer work with other migrant mothers and children. The other mother was still learning the Finnish language. Both mothers and their children depended primarily for their livelihood on Finnish state welfare provision.

Three male interlocutors were first generation migrants who were in their mid to late forties and came to the country as single men, two decades earlier. A fourth one was also first generation but came to the country through a family reunification process to join his wife and stepchildren. The fifth interlocutor

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Abdirashid Ismail. The author and the post-doctoral researcher also conducted interviews with mosque mediators and arbiters. Also, the author undertook the case study of a mosque-run programme for the wellbeing of families, conducting interviews, participant observation and documentation of life stories.

<sup>6</sup> See OSA (2013: 22), drawn from Official Statistics of Finland on Population Structure, Annual Review for 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics in Finland report 60% of unemployment rate among women compared to 46% among men. See Statistics Finland, compiled from the statistical databases on Population Employment 4 October 2013, quoted in OSA (2013: 65).

**Table 1:** Profile of All Interviewees (n = 37)

	Male	Female
Age range	20–52 years old	
Marital status		
Married	16	
Divorced	10	
Single	11	
Education		
No formal schooling	–	1
Middle school	1	2
High School	4	3
Vocational Studies	6	
University	4*	11***
Graduate Degree	3**	2
Employment		
Full-time	10	7
Part-time	4	5
Unemployed	3	5
Full-time student	1	2
Currently married/previously married to non-Somali spouse	2	3
Average duration of residence in Helsinki	18 years	20 years

\*3 of the men are still pursuing their university studies.

\*\*1 interviewee is pursuing a doctorate degree, and 2 informants hold MA degrees.

\*\*\* 4 interviewees are still pursuing university studies.

moved to Finland with his family when he was in his teens. The education level of the men ranged from middle school to post-university level. Two men held clerical jobs in a post office, a third was a school teacher of Islam, and the fourth was an information officer. The fifth man worked part-time in a library (See Table 2).

The divorced interlocutors, similar to the total sample, had strong transnational ties and interdependent relationships with family members in several countries. Shouldering familial financial obligations was an important dimension of these transnational ties. Four men and two women remitted to relatives on a regular basis. Three other women remitted at times of family crises. Other transnational responsibilities included providing care at times of need. One female interlocutor spent a year in the UK taking care of her sick mother, and another spent a few months in a Middle Eastern country caring for her mother when the latter had an operation. Also one male interlocutor made a long visit to the country of origin to manage the financial affairs of the children of his recently deceased relative.

The interlocutors' transnational ties also played a role in their marriages. Six of the ten were in transnational marriages. Three women moved from the country

Table 2: Profile of Divorced Interviewees

	Male (n = 5)	Female (n = 5)
Age range		
25–35	–	4
35–45	1	1
45–50	4	–
Education		
No formal schooling	–	1
Middle school	1	2
High school	1	–
Vocational school	1	–
University	1	2
Graduate degree	1	–
Employment		
Full-time	4	2
Part-time	1	–
Unemployed	–	1
Full-time student	–	1
Part-time student		1
Transnational marriage	3	3
Years of marriage	5–16 years	5–14 years

of origin to Finland as a result of a marriage to Somali migrants. The marriage of one of these women, to a relative, was facilitated by her mother and aunt in Somalia. The other two women met their ex-husbands through networks of relatives, when the ex-spouses were on family visits to Africa. Also, two of the men married Somali women who were living in the country of origin and an Arab country respectively and subsequently brought their spouses to Finland. Again, these two men met their ex-spouses through relatives. In the case of a third male interlocutor, he met and married his wife in the country of origin. After the Somali civil war, the wife migrated to Finland with the children, and the husband joined the family several years later. Perhaps because of the role of the transnational relatives in the interlocutors’ marriages, it is not surprising that their ex-spouses were all Somali, with the exception of one who was a non-Somali migrant of African background. Also, one man was previously married to a Finnish spouse.

### Divorce and Transnational Finnish Somalis: Intersecting Grids of Power and Enabling Discourses

Several factors contributed to the interlocutors’ marital conflicts and subsequent divorce. Transnational familial obligations frequently created marital tensions.



However, it was not these obligations per se that led to marital conflicts, but rather how they intersected with other factors. For instance, gendered shifts in access to resources and scope for agency, resulting from my interlocutors' transnational migratory life, also contributed to marital conflicts. Thus, the increasing level of education of younger women and their professional advancement, as well as the relative economic autonomy of mothers due to their claiming state welfare provision and services, also contributed to marital discord.<sup>8</sup> Again, it was not simply women's possession of material resources that destabilized marriages. Shifts in resource and power differentials were accompanied by evolving incongruence between the marriage goals/values of spouses. This incongruence was enabled by women's shifting ideas about marriage and spousal rights as they acquired new religious knowledge and language, which empowered them to question Somali patriarchal gender norms, and to opt out of unwanted marriages. The women were seeking this religious knowledge from diverse sources such as mosques in Finland which offer Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence classes; internet lectures given by Somali and non-Somali religious scholars; Qur'an recitation classes taught by Somali teachers via Skype; and printed Islamic books purchased during trips to the UK.<sup>9</sup> Some of the women also went on education trips to Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt to learn the Arabic language, and thus facilitate their pursuit of religious knowledge.

Men were also revisiting religion and Somali culture as they made sense of their own divorces – albeit differently from the women. Men were mostly using religious language (as well as invoking Somali family mores) to problematize the new strategies that some women were using at times of marital conflicts such as resorting to law enforcement officers, child welfare institutions, and battered women's shelters. For men, Finnish policies and the public discourse on gender and family disputes contributed to the breakup of their marriages, as they tended to incriminate Muslim husbands. According to these men, however, Finnish state policies and public discourse and their underlying assumptions about Muslim men were not the problem per se, but rather their wives' poor knowledge (of religion and Finnish gender norms) and hence their abuse of the gender-based privileges that the women acquired as a result of migration to Finland. Thus, the relationship between religion and gender was contested by men and women in different ways.

The interlocutors' varied understanding and divorce experiences were shaped by their differentiated positioning within the transnational social fields in which their lives were situated. In what follows, I will elaborate on these key

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<sup>8</sup> See Marja Peltola's study of migrant families in Finland for the mixed implications of state welfare and gender policies for such families.

<sup>9</sup> In Finland, one particular mosque was spearheading the promotion of this reformist discourse which called on married couples – and particularly men – to have companionate marriages that were based on affection, compassion, tranquility, reciprocity, and good knowledge of oneself and one's spouse. The mosque was promoting this discourse through a programme that it had been running for Muslim families since 2011. See Al-Sharmani (forthcoming). In addition, the women were also contributing to the formulation of this discourse – albeit unsystematically – by actively articulating new religious understanding of gender roles and relations in marriage, based on diverse religious arguments, Prophetic reports, Qur'anic interpretations, and other ideas acquired from various sources of religious education.

points with an analysis of two ethnographic examples. I chose to foreground the experiences of two particular interlocutors, Nafisa and Said because their stories provide good examples of the ways in which Somali migrant marriages and divorces are shaped by the transnational social fields which these migrants inhabit. Nafisa and Said's divorce experiences also give insights into the gendered shifts in power differentials that interlocutors and their respective spouses experience as a result of intersecting factors such as unequal resources, changing religious discourses on gender roles, and the realities and policies of the Finnish context.

### **Nafisa<sup>10</sup>**

When Nafisa's husband proposed, she remembered her parents cautioning her, 'You do not have the same level of education. Somali men do not like the woman to be higher and whatever they say, most of them would not like their women to be higher than them'.<sup>11</sup> At the time, Nafisa was an eighteen year old ambitious young woman, finishing high school and planning university studies and a career in a prestigious professional field. Her husband was a twenty-five year old Somali migrant with a vocational degree and a job as a repairman in an electric appliance company. The couple met through a mutual friend. Initially, the couple's gap in education level and career goals was not a problem. Nafisa's reasoning was 'I grew up in Finland and had this Hollywood idea that it did not matter as long as we understand each other. He was sweet, nice, got on with my family and he supported all my goals'. Those goals were that they postpone starting a family, and that she pursue university studies and a career. Nafisa was happy to find a husband who, in her own words was an 'atypical Somali man'. She also considered it important that her marriage and family life would not be like those of the many Somali migrant families whom she knew:

The Somali culture and the Somali homes I saw here, that was one thing that made me think this is the marriage I did not want. I know aunts and uncles, they have lot of kids, the men are away, they are at cafes or travelling, the women are busy with the kids, they are married and have kids but they do not really have a life together, that was the kind of marriage I did not want.

In the above quote, Nafisa described a particular 'Somali family life' which she did not want for herself; one where spouses lacked emotional intimacy and companionship, fathers were uninvolved in their children's lives, and women shouldered all child care and upbringing. Nafisa's critique, here, echoed an increasingly dominant discourse in the larger Finnish Somali migrant community—often spearheaded by some of the mosques—and which sought to reform families and in particular fathers, and encouraged them to distinguish 'Somali culture' from 'religion,' attributing to the former practices such as husbands' emotional distance and fathers' un-involvement in parenting their children. After three years of marriage and securing admission into a university programme in the

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<sup>10</sup> Names of interlocutors are fictitious for the purposes of anonymity and confidentiality.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Nafisa, conducted by the author, December 3, 2013. Nafisa codeswitched between English and Somali. The author translated the Somali parts in the quotes.

UK, Nafisa relocated to pursue her studies. Nafisa and her husband agreed that they would maintain a long-distance marriage relationship until he found work in the UK and joined her. But a year later, the marriage ended in divorce.

An examination of Nafisa's reasoning behind her marriage and divorce decisions suggests that an intersectional approach is useful in analyzing the workings of gender in her experiences and choices. Should we understand, for example, Nafisa's rejection of Somali cultural norms on gendered spousal roles as merely resulting from her upbringing in a western secular society such as Finland? Nafisa's ideas about marriage and gender norms were shaped within a particular transnational social field in which her life was situated. Living in Finland where egalitarian spousal roles are valued was part of this transnational world. But in this same world, Islam as a normative system played a large role in Nafisa's social relations and subject formation. However, religion was not fixed and static in her life but dynamically made sense of and re-embraced. Nafisa was raised by religious parents who moved to Finland when she was a toddler. She also had close relatives and family friends in different European countries and in the country of origin. Education and adhering to Islamic norms were greatly valued in Nafisa's transnational kin-based network. And since her early teens, Nafisa had started her own journey of seeking religious knowledge from diverse sources such as internet lectures, Islamic books, and mosque classes. She noted that reflective learning was what distinguished her pursuit of religious understanding from the religiosity of her childhood days when she mechanically followed her parents' teachings:

In my early teens, I started getting interested in religion. We were raised at home with religion. It was a massive part of our family life. But I also got interested and wanted to have knowledge so that I can answer when people ask me questions. Then I started studying, understanding it. So when you understand it, you start to practice it.

Nafisa's newly acquired religious understanding shaped her marriage choices in mixed ways. These choices could not be classified into clear-cut binaries such as egalitarian and modern or religious and traditional. Rather they were complex and dynamic. For instance, Nafisa decided to marry young, following a report attributed to Prophet Muhammed which encouraged Muslims to marry to protect themselves from illicit sexual relations. But Nafisa's religious understanding also led her to stipulate in her marriage contract that her husband would not take a second wife. This practice is largely unknown among marrying couples in the country of origin as well as among older married couples in Finland, but it was slowly becoming prevalent among the younger migrants (Al-Sharmani 2015). Nafisa's reasoning reflects an engaged revisiting of the Islamic legal doctrine on men's right to polygamy. At the same time this revisiting remains grounded in an Islamic framework. She explained that she did not question the Quranic permissibility of polygamy. However, she also knew that in Islamic jurisprudence a wife could negotiate with her husband that certain stipulations would be entered in the marriage contract. So Nafisa chose to use this right to ensure that her marriage remained a monogamous one. Her motivation also showed a mode of reasoning that combined gender-based rejection of a polygamous relationship with the religious goal of seeking a pious life. Nafisa explained that jealousy and conflict, which, in her opinion, would arise from being in a polygamous marriage, would hinder her from leading a pious Muslim life: 'Polygamy is in the Qur'an.

But in Islam, you can also agree with your husband before marriage not to marry another wife. I know it is in the Qur'an but I know myself. I cannot be a good Muslim if I accepted it. So I made an agreement with him and he accepted it'.

Nafisa's religious understanding also influenced her decision to share with her husband the financial responsibilities of their household. She was aware that Islamic law obligated husbands (and not wives) to provide for their conjugal families, but she also believed that being a pious Muslim necessitated her appreciating the living conditions of migrant families in Finland and the need for spouses to combine financial resources, in order to support their conjugal families and transnational kin. Thus, in the first three years of their marriage, Nafisa worked in several jobs and the couple combined incomes to pay for their bills and remit to the husband's relatives.

But what led to Nafisa's divorce? While the long-distance relationship strained Nafisa's marriage, it was not the direct cause of the divorce. Rather the divorce was enabled by multiple factors that were shaped by the couple's differentiated transnational lives and the ensuing grids of power through which their gender relations were shaped. Nafisa's husband, like her, grew up in Finland. His dream, as Nafisa recounted, was to become a professional chef, but his family was opposed to the idea and he was self-conscious about Somali cultural norms that frowned upon cooking as a job for a man. In addition, he had relatives in different countries who were in need of his financial assistance. Hence obtaining a two-year vocational degree and securing a job quickly was the path best suited to fulfill his family obligations.<sup>12</sup> Nafisa, however, was mostly free from familial obligations that would hinder her professional goals, and only occasionally needed to send remittances. Furthermore, her professional goals were supported by her parents and a transnational network of relatives and friends who were mostly based in Europe.

Nafisa's marriage relationship was shaped by her higher 'social location' (compared to her husband's) and the 'geometries of power' that were tilted towards her. Initially, she was not concerned by this power differential because of the couple's emotional bond and the husband's support of her goals. But over the course of their four-year relationship, several factors converged and destabilized the marriage. At first, Nafisa supported her husband's familial obligations and even contributed regularly to the monthly remittances he sent. However, she became concerned and resentful when she realized that her in-laws were spending remittance money on unnecessary expenses. To her surprise, her husband's grandfather and uncle in Somalia, whom they supported, hired a personal driver. Also, her mother-in-law at one point asked the couple for 5,000 euros to invest in a business, a demand that Nafisa thought was unreasonable since the mother-in-law was living in a European country and was not in dire need of money. But what bothered Nafisa most was that her husband's family was not supportive of her pursuing studies in the UK and increased their financial demands. Nafisa, nevertheless, decided to be patient because as she reasoned, 'God forbid that we deny the family what they say they need, this is not right in our culture or religion'.

However, Nafisa also became aware of the incongruence between her life values and norms and those of her husband. She realized that her husband did

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<sup>12</sup> We did not interview Nafisa's husband. This account is based on the information she provided about him.

not share her religious commitments. He was not keen on seeking religious knowledge or leading a pious life. He also spent a lot of time with male friends, chewing *qat*,<sup>13</sup> particularly since her move to UK. Furthermore, she noticed that sometimes when they were out in public, he looked at other women. Her feeling that this marriage was not right grew. During a visit home from the UK and as Nafisa was contemplating discussing the subject with her husband, he surprised her by proposing that they get a civil divorce but stay married under Islamic law. His reasoning was that he needed to focus on his familial obligations. This proposition, Nafisa said, confirmed to her that they did not share the same religious values. She told her husband, 'if we get a divorce (through the state civil law), we are also divorced under Islamic law. We are not married anymore. Religiously, I do not separate the two, this would be a sin'. Subsequently, the couple got both an Islamic and a civil divorce.

The breakup of Nafisa's marriage was not simply a matter of incompatibility of the couple with respect to educational level and career goals. Nor could their divorce be reduced to a matter of a clash of modernist and traditional marriage norms. Rather, there were multiple intersecting factors that shaped this divorce such as: challenges of transnational family ties and obligations within the context of civil war, changing gender roles and rights due to migration-related shifts in power differentials between women and men, and migrant women's claims to new religious discourse and language. These different dimensions intermingled in the life of the couple in mixed ways. Nafisa's agency to enter into the marriage, opt out of it, and move on with her life was also enabled by several intersecting factors. The right to no-fault Finnish civil divorce – while insufficient as a legal dissolution of marriage for practising Muslim migrants such as Nafisa – makes women's access to (at least) the first tier of divorce automatic and guaranteed. Nafisa also had no trouble securing an Islamic divorce mostly because in her case her husband wanted this divorce, too. Nafisa, however, felt confident that even if the wish to divorce was only on her part, her access to it would not have been difficult. This confidence was based on her religious knowledge which led her to believe that women were entitled to divorce even if the husband did not agree (through *khul'*<sup>14</sup>), an opinion that was repeated by other female interlocutors. Nafisa was also reassured that because of her family's good standing in the migrant community, her husband would not be able to oppose her claim to divorce.

### **Said**

Said, a thirty-six year old school teacher of Islam moved to Finland with his family in his teens. After high school, he went to Saudi Arabia to pursue a university degree in Islamic religious sciences. While living there, Said decided to get married, following the teachings of Prophet Muhammed. With the help of relatives and friends, he got married to a daughter of a Somali family who was

<sup>13</sup> Mild narcotic leaves chewed in East Africa and Yemen.

<sup>14</sup> This is a no-fault divorce in Islamic jurisprudence, initiated unilaterally by the wife and secured in negotiation with the husband or from the judge, in exchange for relinquishing her spousal financial dues.

living there. When Said finished his university studies, he returned to Helsinki and started his teaching career. For several years, Said juggled married life between Saudi Arabia and Finland. He was the provider for his family, and his wife took care of their two children. He also sent remittances to his mother-in-law and his wife's siblings who were living in Yemen. Finally, his family joined him, several years later.

With his wife's relocation, Said's marital troubles began and soon escalated to divorce. Said attributed the breakup of his marriage to a combination of factors: Finnish state institutions dealing with the protection of women and children; his wife's poor religious commitment; the bad influence of female migrants whom she befriended; and the wife's abuse of the privileges granted to her by the Finnish state. To his surprise, Said's wife asked for a divorce a month after her arrival. Three months later, he also found out that she had secretly contacted child welfare and child protection departments and accused him of spousal and child abuse.

She contacted them (child welfare) in secret. She told them not to tell me that she had contacted them. She said: 'He abuses me, he does not support us, he beats the kids, I am afraid of him, he forces me to wear the *hijab*, and he is rigid with religion.'<sup>15</sup>

Said felt vulnerable and wronged. Nobody in these institutions, he complained, tried to investigate the truth of his wife's accusations. They did not contact the people who knew the couple such as their families, or the mosque. Said tried to explain his sense of injustice to staff members in the child welfare office:

I told them if she complained to you, come to me and find out the truth. I believe they (these institutions) played a role in the breakup of my family... But they just said when people come to us to complain, we do not believe or disbelieve them, we mediate.

At one point in the dispute, Said could only see his children under supervision. When his wife transferred the children to another school, the school district office refused to disclose to him the name of the new school. Although Said eventually managed to regain his right to unsupervised child visitation rights, he felt that on the whole Finnish policies and public discourse on gender and child welfare discriminated against Muslim husbands and fathers. This sense of vulnerability made him feel that he had no choices, no agency. His wife threatened to accuse him of marital rape if he did not divorce her. Fearful of getting entangled in serious legal problems, he went to the mosque and pronounced the Islamic divorce in front of the imam. The mosque imam then wrote a paper attesting to the divorce, which was delivered to his wife. Subsequently, his wife petitioned for a civil divorce.

For Said, another contributing factor to the divorce was his wife's waning commitment to religious values and practices. One indication, he noted, was that she took off the *hijab* and started wearing pants. Said also faulted what he saw as his wife's greed and financial priorities. Said believed that his wife sought divorce because she thought she could earn a larger income from Finnish

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<sup>15</sup> Interview conducted by Abdirashid Ismail, January 26, 2014. Interview extracts translated from Somali to English by the author.



state welfare provision as a single mother, and accordingly she could remit more money to her family. There was also the failure of how his wife sought the goal of divorce:

This person (his wife), if she wanted a solution and cared about the interest of the children, we would have found a solution. But she did not follow the path of religion or culture. She did not follow the right path. She followed a path where she got what she wanted by force.

The last line in the above-mentioned quote is telling of Said's sense of disempowerment and loss of agency, which were striking aspects of his divorce experience. He pointed out that he was a 'teacher entrusted with the education of children' and an upstanding Finnish citizen. Said also faulted unnamed people whom he said his wife befriended and who encouraged her to seek a divorce through these measures. Said was hinting that these people were female migrant friends. This notion of emboldened, misled, and misleading migrant women was also articulated by other male informants. One interlocutor complained about his wife's women friends who encouraged her to be defiant with him and eventually call the police during one of their marital conflicts. Another interlocutor, who criticized his wife's domineering and controlling behaviour towards him, also faulted her women friends for their negative influence on her.

While we do not have insight into Said's wife's experience of this divorce, we can note some observations from his account. With the wife's move, there was clearly a shift in the power differential between the two spouses. In Finland, Said's wife did not need to stay in the marriage to secure financial support. The welfare provision that mothers and children receive from the state provided her with an alternative. Also, access to no-fault civil divorce was guaranteed although this divorce in itself was not sufficient to end the marriage in the eyes of this wife (as well as all female interviewees). Hence, Said's wife pushed for an Islamic divorce through the above-mentioned measures. Thus at least materially and legally speaking, Said's wife gained some leverage that gave her scope for agency (Liversage 2012)-albeit a form of agency that was unjust to Said, based on his account.

Said's experience, on one level, reflects the experiences of male disempowerment in divorce disputes, particularly within the context of a liberal welfare state (Collier and Sheldon 2006; Madden-Derdich and Lenoard 2002; Walzer and Oles 2003). Furthermore, being a male migrant, Said's sense of marginalization is further heightened (Charsley and Wray 2015). But on another level, if we delve deeper into Said's life experiences and viewpoints we also arrive at a complex reading of his subjectivity and his gendered experiences. Being a pious Muslim who teaches Islamic religious sciences, Said valued adherence to Islamic rulings. Nevertheless, this did not preclude his espousing dynamic and egalitarian religious norms. For example, he was not married to the idea of fixed spousal roles as dictated by classical Islamic jurisprudence. In fact, he encouraged his wife to get a degree in Islamic studies while they were in Saudi Arabia so that she could secure a teaching job in this field in Finland. Also, while he noted that there were differences between Finnish family law and Islamic family law, he did not see the two systems as incompatible. Said, for example, likened the six-month separation/waiting period that was expected

(in Finnish civil law) to be observed by divorcing couples before the finalization of their divorce to *'idda*, which was the post-divorce waiting period that Muslim wives observed (in Islamic jurisprudence) before their divorce was final. Equally important is that Said, despite his sense of disempowerment by Finnish state institutions and policies, was invested in his identity as a 'Finnish Muslim'. He was critical of Somali migrants who did not establish roots and were contemplating return to the country of origin. Said believed that establishing such roots in Finland entailed integrating through work and compliance with the country's legal system. But by the same token, Said believed that it was incumbent on the Finnish state to work towards the welfare of its Muslim citizens and their families. Said argued that the state, for instance, needed to put in place religious and culturally-sensitive mechanisms for family dispute resolution. This could be achieved, he proposed, by close coordination between state institutions that dealt with family disputes and Muslim communities and mosques.

## Concluding Reflections

Nafisa and Said were second-generation migrants. Yet the complex interplay between gender and religion in their divorce experiences was also true of the divorce experiences of first-generation informants. When we juxtapose Nafisa and Said's experiences (and those of other interlocutors), several key points can be highlighted. First, the lives of many Somali migrant women and men in Finland are grounded in kin-based ties and relationships located within multiple national contexts. Not surprisingly, their marriages and divorce experiences are also influenced by the transnational social fields that they inhabit. In the majority of the divorce cases, transnational familial obligations were a source of marital tensions. Such obligations, however, were not automatically or solely the main cause of the divorce. Rather marriages were destabilized when tensions arising from couples' disagreement over familial obligations and the allocation of marital assets intersected with other factors. These factors included: shifts in power differentials and claim to resources that often favoured women; contested and changing spousal roles and rights; and incongruence between life values and marriage goals of couples. By contrast, the success of some of the researched marriages in the larger study were enabled by couples' compatibility in resources, shared life goals and marriage norms, and their flexibility and cooperation in navigating challenges arising from migration and being part of transnational families (Al-Sharmani and Ismail 2017).

Second, it was not simply women's possession of education, economic autonomy, and legal rights that gave them leverage and scope for agency. Again, it was how these resources aligned with other factors that provided interlocutors with options and a support system. Some of these factors included, for instance, a supportive and nourishing family atmosphere as in the case of Nafisa's family, who helped her pursue her goals. This was also the case with another female interlocutor who came to Finland as the bride of a Somali migrant. This woman's sense of confidence and ambition to pursue her goals of studying, doing volunteer work, and writing were first nurtured



by her father when she was a young refugee woman in East Africa and later on through their regular telecommunication. Her father, who was a learned man with a degree in Islamic religious sciences, taught her about Islamic law and implanted the seeds of her religious understanding of egalitarian spousal relations and rights.

Third, women's renewed interest in Islam as a corrective to one's life and gender relations was situated within a context where other actors in the migrant community were also pursuing similar goals. One key actor was a Somali-populated mosque which was leading organized efforts to educate and rehabilitate families to facilitate their integration and advancement in the society, guided by Islamic values. This mosque ran a programme for families where couples were taught to rethink and relearn Islamic norms on marriage and parenting (Al-Sharmani 2015; Al-Sharmani forthcoming). This process of actively promoting new religious understanding of family relationships was also intertwined with efforts to revisit and reform Somali cultural norms. Such norms, which were the focus of this reformist discourse, included gendered spousal and parenting roles, which were believed to encourage men to be frequently absent and emotionally distant spouses, as well as being uninvolved fathers who were reluctant or embarrassed to contribute to child care and housework. While not all Somali mosques engaged in similar organized efforts, they, nonetheless, shared an Islamic discourse that highlighted men's failures as husbands and fathers and attributed this failure partly to Somali cultural norms on gender roles. According to this discourse, in traditional Somali culture, men's primary role was to provide for the family while women assumed the primary roles in child care, parenting, and housework. But in the country of origin, both spouses were able to receive the support of their extended families, who were often physically close and thus directly and regularly assisted with the roles and obligations of husbands/fathers and wives/mothers. But in the migratory context of Finland, couples often lacked the presence and support of extended families, and men and women's economic roles and contributions to the household changed. Therefore, it was the conviction of those who espoused this reformist discourse that Somali women in Finland needed the help and support of their husbands not so much with maintenance but rather with the care and upbringing of their children, particularly as families struggled with the challenges of racialized and marginalized migratory lives.

Women actively partook in these mosque-led reform efforts.<sup>16</sup> They pursued knowledge from national and transnational sources. With their new religious knowledge and understanding, women gained authority and the language to question a wider range of gendered (and patriarchal) practices. For example, one female interlocutor, who sought divorce because of her husband's polygamy, argued that her husband's polygamy was un-Islamic because it harmed her family while the Qur'an instructs that marriage should bring love and compassion. Another woman justified her divorce because of her husband's lack of emotional intimacy and support for her educational endeavours with the argument that her husband failed to emulate Prophet Muhammed as a loving

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<sup>16</sup> See Liberatore's 2013 study of similar processes among Somali diasporic women in the UK. Similar processes were also studied among non-Somali female Muslim migrants in other European contexts. See Amir-Moazami and Salvatore (2003).

husband who was attentive and respectful of his spouse. Men, on the other hand, while acknowledging the need to rethink some Somali gender norms such as men's lack of involvement in child-care work, did not espouse the religious understanding that questioned patriarchal gender norms. Rather men mostly used religious language to criticize women's use of Finnish gender-based laws and policies to opt out of marriages or redefine spousal relations.

In conclusion, the findings of this research suggest that in the divorces of transnational Somali migrants in Finland, gender and religion are interconnected and experienced in fluid, dynamic, and layered ways. These connections can be better understood through an intersectional approach that takes into account the fluidity and dynamism of these categories as markers of difference and power.

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